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## **Grammar and Grammar Teaching: Changing Perspectives**

**Editor**  
**Dr. Vathana Fenn**

### **Inferred-Negative Recognition in a Grammar Classroom**

**Dr. Sameer Ali Al-Salihi, Ph.D.**

#### **Introduction:**

Inferred Negative in this article refers to language structures that project negation through devices other than N-negators (no, not, never, non-) or negative words (hardly, scarcely); it is meant to be represented by hypothetical conditionals, possibly propositions, and such literary contexts as irony or sarcasm.

A paramount objective behind this project is to empirically investigate how well a sample of Arab learners of English studying grammar recognizes Inferred Negative.

The researcher has employed a test to scrutinize the students' comprehensibility of inferred negative. This inevitably requires finding out the meta-

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linguistic awareness of the pragmatically inferred language, which has to do with students' ability to reflect on the realistic language use' where the investigator has worked out any presupposition or implication projected in the learner's mind screen.

A complementary creative action is taken by the researcher in which he is expected to come up with logical representation using certain symbols for propositions with invisible meanings.

Some recommendations based on the findings arrived at have been introduced to the teaching staff to promote their students' interest in learning this type of grammar, which can be connected to human tendency to think in opposites.

## Overview

Needless to claim that all the grammarians were all in agreement on the negative definition; hence, consulting such works as (Quirk, et al. 1985:782; Murphy, 2004; Richards, 1996:243) lets us come up with this general definition: 'negative or negation is a grammatical term for contradicting or denying some or all of the meaning of an affirmative (positive) sentence in terms of inserting a negative word into the appropriate position in that sentence'.

A lot of writings and research devoted to the negation literature have accounted for what we call '*regular* negative' where *regular* is used to mean 'pertaining to the language form that adheres to the conventional standards of usage and correctness. In this type a word or part of the word often called a '*negator*' (Richards, op cit.: 244) represented by:

A. The negative particle (or adverb) '*not*', contracted (*n't*) :

- 1) a- He is not (isn't) there.
- b- They asked him not to leave.

**B.** The negative particle (adjective/adverb) '*no*' :

2) There is no food./ His recovery was no small miracle.

**C.** The negative indefinite pronouns '*nothing, nobody, none*' and adverb '*nowhere*' :

3) Nobody passed the test./ We went nowhere.

**D.** The frequency adverb '*never*':

4) That idea never occurred to me./ Never mind.

**E.** The prefix '*non-*' : non-racist

This type of negation can also be called '*n-word* negation'. It has not been difficult to predict that this type is relatively easily realized by EFL learners at various levels in the educational institutions by reason of the existence of *n-words* in the surface structure. However, regular negative is **out of the scope** of this paper. Our main concern will be 'implicit negative'.

### **Inferred Negative**

Inferred negative (henceforth I.N.) is not pictured by a lexical item such as an 'n-word' or other 'partial negators such as rarely, hardly, seldom, etc.,' but projected on the screen mind (deep structure. I.N. therefore, is present but not said; it is completely invisible and comes out in terms of '*inferring*' based on what additional meaning is to be suggested, implied, or conveyed out of the sentence or utterance said. As far as our topic is concerned, it has been found that two types of pragmatically implicit negative are included: 1) **presupposed** and 2) **implicit** negatives.

#### **1. Presupposed Negative**

From the general definition of *presupposition* offered by Pecci (2010:19), "anything the speaker assumes to be true before making the utterance", presupposed

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negative is assumed by the speaker to be true and greatly dependent on the assertion to be made by the listener in his reaction (e.g., providing an answer); anyhow, the pre-assumption (presupposition) exists unless it is contradicted.

Consider this example: (Technically, the symbol >> stands for '*presupposes*')

**Speaker:** He used to smoke. >> *He no longer smokes.*

Answering this question by the person addressed:

**The person addressed:** "I think this is correct" means that this presupposition becomes true, i.e., asserted. In this article, however, the person addressed is not our concern, that is, we are interested only in what is negatively presupposed by the speaker (or writer).

This type of invisible negative, to continue, was traditionally expressed as 'hypothetical-meaning based' (for detailed explanation of the term, see 184; Quirk, et al. 1985:338 & Leech and Svartivic, 1988:125; Levinson, 1983), in which past verb tenses have been used to denote unreality or past probability or what has been called 'opposed meaning'. Exemplifying this is included in this classification of the presupposed negative:

**a) Unreal condition with negative expectation (= presupposing falsehood or unlikely condition):**

5) (a) If he listened to me, he wouldn't have a problem. >> he didn't listen to me

(b) If the notice had only said 'mine-field in English, we would never have lost poor Llewellyn. >> the notice didn't say 'mine-field' in English

**b) The subjunctive 'were', expressing unreal wish or regret:**

6) (a) It's time you were in bed. >> you are not in bed

(b) If I were you, I wouldn't do it. >> you weren't me

**c) The conjunctions 'as if/ as though':**

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- 7) (a) He behaves as if he owns the place. >> he doesn't own it  
 (b) It was as though the world had come to an end. >> it hadn't come to an end.

d) Verbs like 'wish and suppose' :

- 8) (a) I wish he had done it. >> he hadn't done it& there is no consequence  
 (b) Just suppose we were jailed there. >> we weren't jailed there& there is no consequence.

e) Such an expression as 'in your place' :

- In your place, I would have taken a taxi. >> he/she wouldn't have it

## 2. Implicit Negative

Negative here exists in some literary or rhetorical devices such as *irony*, *sarcasm*, *pun*, *wit*, *apophasis*, etc. (for an explanation of these terms, see Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia, 2005). Through these devices where the literary boundaries among them are often not clear-cut, a negative reference (often expressed by the use of an antonym) is intentionally projected in the speaker's/writer's mind, whereas the listener/reader has to ponder a bit to work out the intended meaning depending on such factors as context, background, knowledge, and inference. Then to capture the reality of the negative meaning, a listener/reader has to apply these relations:  
 (The symbol ~ is used to stand for negation.)

- 9) (a) ~ (positive reference) → a negative result, or  
 (b) ~ (negative reference) → a positive result

The second yields a double negative (see Newmark, 1995:168), but its result is imaginatively constructed. Additionally, suprasegmental units, (a term used by Cruttenden, 2001:42, 63, 255) such as stress, tone, and intonation, are often used to clarify the speaker's attitude.

To account for this class of negation modestly and effectively in this paper, only two literary devices, namely *irony* and *sarcasm* are covered. In addition, a third different type concerning with possibility is used.

## 2.1 Irony-Based Negative

Irony occurs when a speaker/writer expresses one thing and means the opposite (using an antonym) which is often semantically signaled as negative. Consider these situational examples: (the symbol  $\Rightarrow$  is used to stand for *implies*)

(i) If a person exclaims, "I am calm!", but reveals an upset emotional state through his rising voice. In this way he covertly or implicitly means:

10)      $\sim$  calm  $\rightarrow$  upset

That is, 'he is not calm (upset)!' This might happen in a classroom situation with a few trouble-making learners in which "an additional conveyed meaning" has been inferred( Yule, 2001:142). Brown and Yule (1983:31) consider the like an 'implicature' (an alternative word to 'implication) which is described by Grice (1975: 44) as "the intended meaning that goes beyond the literal meaning."

(ii) "Nice, nice! His speech is always nice!", a phrase within a speech given by one statesman who has been much offended by his political opponent when he had accused him of being 'a double agent'. Here, an expression of praise (i.e., nice) is used where blame (  $\Rightarrow$  unpleasant or not likable) is meant. Irony is normally reinforced via a variation in the length of syllables, tone units, and speech rhythm.

Peccei (2007:32), nevertheless, accounts for the difficult situation of this variation by stating" Gestures, facial expressions, and tone unit of voice cannot be recreated on the printed page, and yet a great deal of the communication in

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conversations involves these channels." This can be paraphrased as understanding such an ironic settings involves far more than knowing the words uttered or the grammatical relations between them, and this beyond this article.

In a grammar-class situation, this conversation between an Indian teacher (T) and his/her learner (L):

11) T: Where is London? L: London's in Pakistan, isn't it, teacher?

T: And New Delhi is in America, I suppose.

Here the teacher's answer ironically serves to implicate: => London isn't in Pakistan

(iii) The 'tallest' person in a classroom might be called "Shorty!" where the latter (i.e., antonym) represents the negative aspect of the former.

## 2.2 Sarcasm-Based Negative

Sarcasm refers to an act stating the opposite of the intended meaning through sneering, jesting or mocking at a person, situation or thing, e.g., to say 'That's fantastic!' in an offended tone would mean:

12) ~ (fantastic) => awful = 'That's awful!' .

It 'is sometimes viewed as an expression of concealed anger or annoyance. Hence the example above may be employed above in a situation where someone takes the position of another by force or any illegal action. Two other situations are taken from (Barnhart, 1995:88):

(i) 'How unselfish you are!' said the little girl in a sarcasm as her sister took the biggest piece of cake. Obviously 'unselfish' here strongly signals an opposite meaning through negative:

13) 'How + ~unselfish+ you are?' to mean 'you are not unselfish' ; this double negative (negating a negation) resolves to a positive /affirmative in terms of semantically deleting the negatives:

14) ( ~ un-) : yielding "you are selfish" the speaker's anger may be indicated by stressing the length of the whole syllables of the word 'UNSELFISH'; for a brief discussion of the term 'double negative', see Richards, et al. (2002: 116).

(ii) 'Don't Hurry!' was my brother's sarcastic comment as I slowly dressed. Here the listener relied on the process of inference to arrive at an interpretation of that sentence: Do Hurry.

Structurally, this inference comes into being by:

15) Don't + ~ hurry.

In Levinson (1983:111), a learner receives a negative implied response as follows:

16) *Jonny*: Hey Salley, Let's play marbles.

*Mother*: How's your homework getting along Jonny?

His mother here wants to remind him => He may not be free to play yet.

For more examples of implicature, see O'grady, et al. (1996:300ff).

### 2.3 Possibility-based Negative

This type implies sentences containing possibility structures, such as '*possibly, maybe, probably, may/verb, perhaps*'. The sentences, for Levinson (1983:123,140), logically share their negative implicature forms. For example:



- 17) There may be life on Mars => There may not be life on Mars.

### 3. Test

The subject of this article has come to the writer's mind when he sometimes used such inferred negative implied or presupposed in special-classroom utterances, just to grab the learner's attention to a classroom-pedagogical situation to react in an opposite way. The examples employed in the explanations of the types of this topic show that we can, intentionally or unintentionally, imply negative in utterances in terms applying suprasegmental features. Teachers might exploit this article to promote their students' awareness towards a pragmatic understanding of sentential contexts, particularly those with negative implication.

To scrutinize the study ideas and claims regarding the students' comprehensibility of inferred-negative structures, a test is conducted.

#### 3.1. Test Description

A recognition test given to students can indicate how well they perform in using negative, and hence, such tests can provide a good base for developing some recommendations to those who are pragmatically interested in proper use of negatives. Bearing this in mind, the test may be used to identify the gap between what students have studied and what they apply in that area and how we can support the positive application.

The test is of two parts:

**Part 1** tests the students' recognition of all the structures accounted for in regular (5 items) and presupposed (5 items) negation types, using a reading-comprehension technique requiring a yes-no answer.

**Part 2** also tests the students' recognition of all the structures accounted for in the 'inference-based negative' through listening-to-the-teacher and reading the contexts with the role-play technique. It contains seven items: five (Items 2,3,4,5,7) with implicit negative and two (items 1 and 6) as distracters (See the appendix).

The test-retest technique was used to determine the reliability, where the test was administered on two separate occasions. The first set of scores was correlated with the second; the reliability correlation result was (+ 0,78) which was considered acceptable. Regarding the test validity, 'face validity technique was applied, where the test was given to some senior staff to have their subjective opinions. Most staff pointed out that the test appears to measure the recognition knowledge it claims.

### **3.2. Subjects**

The subjects of the test were Saudi male students from the English Language Center in Jubail Industrial College. They are leveled as being 'intermediate' since they have finished two comprehensive novitiate programs. Only the so-called Regular-Negative structures were confirmed to be studied through both grammar and skills.

### **3.3. Findings**

Close scrutiny of the answers indicated a logic expressing ease or difficulty in accounting for the negative included in the test among the subjects. There was a general trend that they could recognize more easily the regular negative structures which they were already taught using their prescribed course-books; however, some lexical negative words such as 'hardly and seldom' were more difficult to be realized due to little frequency of occurrence or complex context of their usage. On the other hand, as the comparison lay between regular and presupposed negation in Part 1, the researcher found out far more positive performance regarding former (regular:82% , items 1-5), whereas the latter (presupposed) was found having highly low

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performance( 9%, items 6-10) as it was more difficult to realize due to its status as invisible and of a pragmatic-treatment nature.

As regards Part 2, the ' implicit negative' with positive performance of (73%) was, unexpectedly, more easily recognized than the' presupposed negative' since the situations concerning the former were said with sound affections (e.g., the length of syllables, tone units, and speech rhythm) and/or role-play led to the proper answers; the two distracting items were very effective in reducing guessing.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Sure enough, this article, which was a modest attempt to investigate a significant pragmatic category of negative (i.e., inferred negative), simply captured how well a sample of non-native speakers of English (who have completed high intermediate-leveled courses) perform it at a recognition level only. Following are some recommendation based on the findings arrived at above:

- a) Generally speaking, situational tutoring in association with role-play activities much assists in stepping up the students' readiness to recognize pragmatic concepts effectively.
- b) In college classrooms, tutors should accidentally underscore the role of pragmatics as it basically deals with working out additional meanings, not literarily communicated (see examples, 11 and 16 above). Students' awareness, therefore, towards understanding invisible meanings would increase chances to much understand the other clearly- a paramount need in today's world.
- c) A simple symbolic methodology can be selected to deal with 'inferred negative'(or any other pragmatic concept) in the process of teaching, e.g., some symbols such as ' >> , => , ~ ' were employed in this study to logically express the idea of what is negatively presupposed or implied in certain grammatical structures. Engineering-or-Industrial-College Students generally have math and science minds.

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- d) The use of suprasegmental features (gestures, facial expressions, tone units, rhythm) should be underscored to reinforce working out additional meanings, if any.
- e) The concept of negative (regular or inferred) ought to be of learners' concern  
On the basis of the fact that there is a general human tendency "to think in opposites" i.e., any statement can be false unless it is reasonably asserted.

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### Appendix: Test

**Part 1)** Consider carefully the following items, then use (✓) for **YES** when you feel there is a negative structure communicated (literarily said) or not; if not, use **x** for NO:

	Statements	YES	NO
1	His discovery was no small miracle.		
2	I hardly travel abroad.		
3	Fawzi seldom fixes his car by himself.		
4	Neither of the employees works properly.		
5	People don't like		
6	He behaves as if he owns the place		
7	I wish he had done it.		
8	Just suppose we were jailed there		
9	In your place, I would have taken a taxi		
10	It's time you were in bed		

**Part 2)** Listen to the instructor carefully. use (✓) for **YES** when you feel there is a negative structure communicated (literarily said) or not; if not , use **x** for NO:

		YES	NO
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1	One of the employees made very good suggestions to complete a great project. The boss said to that employee , " <b>Thanks so much for your <i>help</i>, "</b>		
2	In a classroom situation with a few trouble-making children who have deliberately caused quarrels with a lot of a noise , the teacher exclaimed (with a loud, rising voice) , " <b>I am <i>calm</i> !</b> Would you please listen to me?"		
3	" <b>Nice, nice! His speech is always nice!</b> ", a phrase within a speech given by one statesman who has been much offended by his political opponent when he had accused him of being ' a double agent'.		
4	Your head 'll hit the roof, <b>Shorty!!</b>		
5	In a birthday party , " <b><i>How unselfish you are!</i></b> ", said the little girl in a sarcasm as her sister took the biggest piece of cake.		
6	" <b>You wok <i>hard</i></b> , Ahmad," the teacher said with a humorous look, as he has found out that Ahmad has always done his homework well.		
7	' <b>Don't Hurry!</b> ' , was my brother's sarcastic comment as I slowly dressed . We both were invited to attend a conference.		

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